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# Battered, RIM Pins Hopes on Next Wave of Devices

By **IAN AUSTEN**

OTTAWA — After months of misery underlined by the declining market share of its BlackBerry phone in North America, a profoundly unsuccessful move into tablet computers and, just last week, a prolonged failure of its service for millions of users worldwide, [Research in Motion](#) has a new opportunity to convince the world that it remains relevant.

Starting Tuesday, the company will hold its annual conference for software developers in San Francisco. Normally, the conference, with sessions like, “Alice.js: A Lightweight Independent CSS Engine,” would grab little attention. But this conference is for the developers RIM must persuade to build the apps for the next generation of BlackBerrys and PlayBook tablets. Without those apps, people are less likely to buy the devices and restore the company’s former glory.

“The meeting is important and it’s going to be really difficult for RIM,” said Kevin Burden, an industry analyst with ABI Research. “It’s going to have to get up there and talk about real timelines. You can’t have half-baked products and half-baked plans.”

Research in Motion, which is led by Jim Balsillie and Mike Lazaridis, has an entirely new mobile operating system, and developers hope the company will reveal details at the conference about the next generation of smartphones to be built around it. But the company has said little about those phones and has given developers no specific timeline for their introduction. It has continued to promote its devices’ security and, until last week, technical reliability as the main attractions of the current BlackBerry long after Apple’s [iPhone](#) and phones using Google’s [Android](#) operating system had made mobile devices into pocket-size computers as well as communications devices.

Because the BlackBerry operating system now on the market is descended from the one installed in the first BlackBerrys 12 years ago, RIM has been unable to match rivals’ performance. As a result, the company is in somewhat the same position as Ford Motor

when Henry Ford stubbornly persisted with the Model T well into the 1920s, long after consumer tastes had shifted toward more sophisticated cars.

RIM's recovery plan is to introduce a new generation of BlackBerrys that will use a more capable operating system known as QNX (pronounced CUE-nix). But despite the importance of those products, RIM has been cagey about their features and design and vague about when they will be offered for sale next year.

Many analysts do not expect RIM's executives to use the developers' conference to unveil those new phones. But they do agree that RIM will have to offer specifics about the arrival dates for the QNX phones as well as their features and broad capabilities.

"There's plenty of them to explain about how they're going to remain a relevant player in the smartphone market," said Nick Dillon, an analyst with Ovum in London. "They're going to have to get right into their plan and describe how that transition will work."

But long before RIM has to sell consumers on the QNX BlackBerrys, it needs to persuade developers, like those attending the conference, to create apps that will run on them.

The BlackBerry PlayBook, the company's first tablet computer and its first QNX device, noticeably lacks apps, months after going on sale.

"It's nice hardware but there's not much you can do on the PlayBook," said Kunal Gupta, the chief executive of Polar Mobile, a company in Toronto that creates apps for broadcasters, publishers and sports leagues.

RIM's executives have acknowledged in earlier interviews that their company must improve its relationship with developers. (RIM did not make anyone available for interviews for this article.)

Mr. Gupta said that the fresh start with QNX and the new phones would most likely make BlackBerry more attractive to developers who have avoided the system. Mr. Gupta, however, is something of an old hand with the BlackBerry. About 300 of the 1,200 applications Polar has developed are for BlackBerrys.

Beyond that, Mr. Gupta said it would be critical for RIM to convince developers at the conference that its QNX operating system will become a major software platform with a long-term future, unlike, say, webOS, which was recently abandoned by Hewlett-Packard. "RIM needs to position this as a new opportunity," said Mr. Gupta, who will send some of

his employees based in San Francisco to the conference. “RIM needs to bring transparency and clarity about what the potential upside is for developers, what’s the potential profit.”

Jamie Murai, a co-founder of [Maide](#), a small apps developer, provoked widespread online discussion earlier this year by posting an [open letter](#) to RIM about the shortcomings of its application development process for the PlayBook. “I can only assume that you are trying to drive developers away by inconveniencing them as much as humanly possible,” wrote Mr. Murai, who lives in Waterloo, Ontario, where RIM is based.

Among the factors that frustrated Mr. Murai was the complexity of RIM’s tools for creating and testing BlackBerry applications and the bureaucratic process. For example, the company required developers to provide notarized copies of their identification.

Among those who responded to Mr. Murai was Tyler Lessard, who as RIM’s vice president for global alliances and developer relations at the time, arranged a personal meeting. Mr. Lessard left RIM late last month.

RIM presents its developers with a set of complications. In addition to having to make apps work on two current operating systems as well as the coming QNX system, BlackBerry apps must be tweaked to account for the different screen sizes of various BlackBerrys. Apps have to be compatible with both touch screens and conventional displays. Make it too difficult, and developers could choose to write software for Apple or Android devices, particularly in North America, where the company’s decline has received widespread publicity.

In an interview last week, Mr. Murai said that he had seen some changes at RIM since then, but noted that the company still had some distance to go. “I’ve seen some improvement, but it’s still a different world than Apple’s tools,” Mr. Murai said.

In the end, the small sales of PlayBooks dissuaded Mr. Murai from developing any apps for them. He is, however, attending the developer’s conference.

“RIM gave me a free ticket and I was actually going to be in San Francisco anyway,” he said.

